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ABSTRACT

This newsletter issue's feature describes difficulties the special child faces in acquiring social skills, and ways in which families and teachers can help. It outlines the socialization process beginning in early infancy, with eating habits being one of the first ways an infant is socialized into his or her culture. In early childhood, the importance of learning social development through imitation is noted, and the special child's inability to imitate is cited as one of the reasons the special child has difficulty acquiring appropriate behaviors. At school age, the child is ready to be taught specific social skills. Three social skills are stressed: acquiring self-control, developing peer relationships, and learning social amenities. Tips for helping children to develop each of these skills are provided. The newsletter concludes with a "Psychologist's Corner" column by George Popper on understanding the child's psychological test results. Commonly used academic achievement and intelligence tests are described, including the Wide Range Achievement Test-Revised and the verbal and performance scales of the Wechsler Intelligence Scale for Children-Revised. (JDD)

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Special Parent ★Special Child

Practical pointers for parenting handicapped children

VOL. 4, NO. 3 MAY/JUNE 1988

SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT AND THE SPECIAL CHILD

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All infants begin life as helpless creatures dependent on others for food, nurture, warmth and stimulation in order to survive. By the age of two most children are capable of more independent behavior including walking, talking or beginning to understand what is said to them. Toddlers at this stage require constant attention as their drive for independence impels them to explore, touch and get into everything. As youngsters move from infancy into the more autonomous activities of childhood, parental expectations increase. While loathe to frustrate bids for independence, most parents at the same time expect their children to be well-behaved, display good manners in public, play well with others, curb disruptive behavior and mind others, especially adults.

How parents and others encourage and shape such acceptable behaviors is called **socialization**. These skills of **social development include self control, peer relationships and social amenities.**

Learning what is appropriate behavior and what is unacceptable is often challenging to the child with normal development and can be overwhelming when the child has special needs. In this issue we will focus on the difficulties facing the special child in acquiring social skills and how their families and teachers can help them.

How socialization occurs

Early infancy. From the first day of life we begin to civilize our offspring. Different people use different childcare practices and these practices mold the child's personality and prepare him for life in the society of other people.

Of all infant care practices, feeding is of vital interest, not only because satisfaction of the infant's food needs is critical for his normal physical development but also because feeding may be the occasion of important social interaction and physical contact. Even though the demands upon the infant must be limited to what he can do, his feeding schedules move in the direction of the three-meal-a-day person he is expected to become.

While the effort to make the child a three-meal-a-day person who eats properly is one of the

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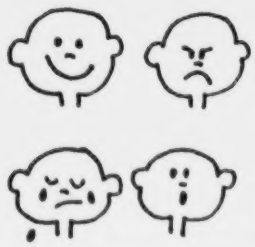

ways in which the infant is socialized in our culture, eating habits have other consequences for development. The love of food becomes intertwined with feelings of attachment toward the mother or mother-figure who provides the nourishment. A warm, intimate and continuous relationship with the mother or mother substitute is essential in early years. Unless the child sustains this relationship, his ability to form personal relationships is apt to be impaired. If an infant is to attain mature social behavior, he must be involved in the security of a loving relationship. Satisfaction of his physical wants alone is not enough. Often, special children, because of their physical or developmental limitations, have longer periods of dependency before moving on to the next stage.

Early childhood. While the earliest months of infancy seem to have unusual importance, the socialization process continues throughout childhood and youth. There are other factors in understanding how the child becomes a personality interacting with other persons in his social environment.

One of the most important aspects in social development is imitation, or learning to do something by watching someone else do it.

The first step is for the child to be able to understand, notice and take an interest in what is going on around him. Secondly, after the child has a mental picture of the act, he then performs the act himself. Whether or not the child imitates the act is greatly influenced by rewards and punishment and how he perceives the person he is imitating. He is most likely to imitate someone he perceives as powerful or competent such as his parents.

The inability to imitate is one of the reasons the special child has such difficulty acquiring appropriate behaviors. Parents should be aware that often the special child's powers of observation, or ability to understand what is occuring around him, are either delayed or impaired. Parents and teachers must make a special effort to intervene, to make sure the child has their attention and then to actually mold and shape the desired activity. Frequent repetition and praise of the desired behavior are necessary.

School age. While the patterns of the child's social relationships begin in the home, people outside the home, especially his peers, soon become important to him. School takes the place of the family as the child reaches school age. In school, especially nursery school, the child learns to play with others and to conform to a routine in which he is not the center of attention. He learns to be aggressive enough to keep others from interfering with his rights, yet he must learn to share and play cooperatively. The school continues the process of preparing the child for life in our society.

Parents and teachers should recognize that social skills must be **taught** to the special child. It's usually the one area that the special needs child doesn't pick up on his own as do others of his age.

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Home and school can be effective partners in this effort. Initially, the home provides the basic security and warmth so that the child perceives social interactions as positive. Once beyond this stage, parents and special educators—through demonstration, training and repetition—can provide the special child with the skills that will enable him to become a welcome participant everywhere.

Acquiring self control

Self control is a key aspect in the social development of all children. However, special children by very definition have a more difficult time curbing impulsive, out-of-control behavior. Often, special children, because of their sensitive neurological systems, are easily over-stimulated, unable to filter out even normal environmental sounds and noises. Developmental and emotional immaturities play a large part in the special child's low tolerance for frustration. Special children are apt to be distractable and tantrum-prone. They can't wait their turns and react adversely to changes in schedule. Helping the special child overcome impulsivity takes patience and effort but is invaluable if the child is to function as normally as possible.

Do's and don'ts

• **Do recognize that your home is an ideal place** for providing the structure your special child needs. If at home you have accepted whining, running from the table, bids for attention or striking others, don't expect him to behave any differently in public places.

• **Do set up reasonable rules and regulations**, ones that are comfortable for the entire family. Many special children, because of their own inner turmoil and disorganized feelings, literally thrive on reliable external controls. Make an effort to provide a daily reliable schedule of events—first dinner, then bath, story or TV and then bedtime, for example.

• **Don't contradict your own rules.** Special children, despite their limited powers of observation, intuitively sense if you mean what you say or if you change your mind frequently. By the same token, don't make threats you can't carry out. This not only confuses; it can lead to "testing" behavior.

• **Do remember that if you expect certain behaviors** from your special child, you must behave in like fashion. Punishing Johnny for screaming by screaming at him prompts confusion and non-compliance.

• **Do give your child extra hints** about what is coming next as this also prevents impulsivity: for example, setting his placemat and cup at his place at the table signals that it's time for a sit-down meal and not food on the run. Toys put away in the toy box signals the end of the day and another clue that the bedtime routine beckons.

• **Do remove as much excess stimuli** from your home as possible. Blaring radios, TVs, bright lights, a bedroom loaded with toys and debris promote a sensory

overload that can cause crankiness in the special child.

• **Do provide a home environment that is safe as well as inviting.** It's easier to put up secure gates or fence an area where your child can play than to retrain your special child out of the bad habit of being chased after.

• **Do give immediate rewards** for any display of good behavior or compliance with household rules. Too often parents only pay attention when their child is misbehaving. Reward him with smiles, hugs and treats when he is good and he is apt to continue.

Peer relationships

Special children, just as all children, need the self-esteem and self-concept that companionship brings. The social benefits of group play include learning how to obey rules, following directions, sharing and accepting the decisions of others.

Many special parents comment that their child doesn't seem to be able to play well with others. In many cases he hasn't had a chance to experience the give and take of play. Often the special mother's concern for her child prompts her to interfere excessively when her special son or daughter plays with others. Special parents often fight their children's battles for them, protect them overzealously from getting hurt, interpret the rules or otherwise buffet their children from loss or defeat.

In order to be effective, parents should supervise but not intrude. The special child must learn to live and play in a world that does not revolve exclusively around meeting his needs. Children should be helped to see what works and doesn't work in play situations. In the world of the playground the special child encounters aggression and resistance as well as friendship. It is here that the special child learns that his playmates have feelings like his own; for example, that swiping another's toys brings hurt feelings or retaliation. Here's how to encourage appropriate peer relationships in your special child.

Do's and don'ts

• **Do make your yard or playroom** an inviting place for other children to play. This encourages peer contacts.

• **Do build into your home routine** ample time for table, card or checker games or other types of leisure activities. Make sure your special child gets plenty of practice learning the rules of the game and how to share, take turns, lose or win gracefully before he goes out to play with others. Remember that your youngster needs to be taught many of the simple play activities or skills that other children absorb on their own.

• **Do remember that too much unstructured or "free" play** for special children can rapidly deteriorate into overly loud or disorganized behaviors. Special children rely on external structure more than others. Make sure you are there to suggest or supervise without becoming too dominant.

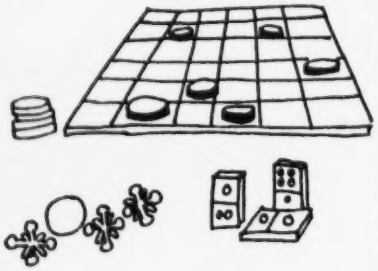
• **Don't push your special child**

into play or sports activities he's not ready for or force him to play with children who are way beyond him developmentally. Remember that his peers are children who function at his level and with whom he feels comfortable. This will mean extra effort on your part to find special recreation programs such as Special Olympics.

• **Don't get overly concerned when your** child reacts with tears when he loses. It's essential for him to feel the pangs of defeat and learn how to handle these feelings. Don't shield him but perhaps show him ways to do things differently the next time.

• **Do allow him to experience some frustration.** Fighting his battles or rushing in to soothe or solve all his problems ultimately robs him of his self-confidence.

• **Don't interrupt his activities unnecessarily.** Allow him to try to figure out how to do things on his own, such as putting together a puzzle or finishing a model. If you always complete his tasks for him, he will never learn how to sustain activities to completion, including finishing a game with a playmate.



• **Do show your child pictures or make a scrapbook** of facial expressions that display anger, surprise, pain, joy or sadness so that your child can recognize these reactions in other children. Special children often are unaware or misread these social cues and thus overreact or act inappropriately because they have misinterpreted people's responses to them.

• **Do play with your special child a question-and-answer game** that focuses on feelings. Ask him what would he do, for instance, "if someone took your toy, you would . . .?" If he answers "hit him," or "cry," guide him to more appropriate responses. Ask him "how do you think your friend would feel if you took his toy?" Show him that others have feelings just as he does and that other children have rights as well as he.

• **Do take into consideration your special** child's developmental level in play situations. Often, special parents are embarrassed when their special youngster rampages through the playground, swiping toys, knocking down other children's towers, blocks, etc. In many cases, this is not willful misconduct but the inability of the special child to understand the abstract concept of "mine" versus "theirs." Take a recognizable, favorite toy to the playground and firmly insist your special child handle that toy or only others in his possession. Keep repeating "this is your toy," or "Bobby's ball" etc., until he recognizes that he is not to handle anything else unless invited.

• **Do provide time for friends or play experiences.** This sometimes is more of a hassle than just letting your special child watch TV, but ultimately it is worthwhile because playing with others increases overall social skills.

Social amenities

What are considered the social graces or even plain good manners do not come naturally to the special child. Polite interchanges, which other children absorb as a normal part of growing up, must be taught by constant modeling and repetition to the special child. Observe your special child closely; does he know when and how to use the following?

• polite greetings of "Hello," "Goodbye," "How are you?"

• other amenities including smiles of recognition accompanied by appropriate eye contact.

• appropriate use of "Please," "Thank you," "Excuse me," or "Sorry."

• proper physical contacts such as whom to kiss farewell, how to wave goodbye or when to shake hands.

• proper table manners including use of utensils.

• getting along in community settings—churches, restaurants, libraries, stores.

Many special families are discomfited by the embarrassing public behaviors of their special child. Although it takes considerable effort to instill polite behaviors, it is well worth the time because family life is enriched by being able to take family vacations, to have friends visit or to participate in the community without fears of embarrassment.

Do's and don'ts

RELATED ISSUES THAT WILL HELP:

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• **Do take your special child out** into the community from infancy on. Initially, spend very short periods of time in such places as church, stores or the library. Leave **before** the child shows any signs of restlessness. Praise and reward your child for appropriate behavior and gradually increase the time. In this way he will become accustomed to riding on buses, visiting public places, etc.

• **Do discuss in a matter-of-fact way different behaviors** and their consequences. Misconduct in a restaurant, yelling out, etc. means **removal** and some form of punishment. Mean and do what you say.

• **Do remember the best way to teach** your child polite phrases is to use them continually at home. "Please," "Thank you" and smiles of recognition should be used repeatedly at every opportunity until they become part of your special child's repertoire. Praise him and thank him for remembering his "thanks."

• **Do model or role play for him the proper way** to shake hands, look people in the eye and smile. If at all possible, make a video tape or a photograph album of your child engaged in these activities so he can actually see what he looks like and how it should be done.

• **Do make a tape of your child** in conversational situations, especially if his voice quality is too loud.

• **Do teach your special child** when to talk and when not to. Special children are prone to rattle on, don't know how to end a conversation or intrude into other's conversations. Practice with your child when to make comments and when not to. Practice prearranged gestures, such as finger-to-mouth, which will signal him that it is time to end the conversation. Tape record some conversations so that he will get used to the cadence and pauses of polite speech.

• **Do teach your special child the best way to react** in embarrassing situations. Spillage, soilings, seizures are unavoidable, unfortunate occurrences, but are just that and no more. Profuse apologies draw unnecessary and prolonged attention to events that should be smoothed over.

• **Do make sure to use simple, direct language** in teaching your

child polite manners. Often phrases such as "That's rude" or "Don't interrupt" are meaningless abstractions. Rephrase this to describe the appropriate behavior in concrete terms.

• **Do tell your child ahead of time how to act in a social situation**, a wedding, for example, or a family celebration. Go over what is expected of him—quiet voice tone, how to greet others, how long he is expected to sit still, etc. Praise him for his good behavior.

• **Do avoid negative commands** as much as possible. Continually using "No," "Stop" or "Don't" does not provide your child with appropriate alternatives. Instead of "shushing" your child to quiet him, ask him to speak in a whisper or ask him to imitate your lowered voice.

• **Do remember that your overall respect** for your child is the best way to promote his social development.

PSYCHOLOGIST'S CORNER:

Understanding your child's psychological test results

by George Popper, Ph. D.

If you are the parent of a special child, your child was probably tested by a psychologist and you have seen the results of these evaluations. Most of the time, psychologists go to great lengths to explain what each test measures and how and why it was used. Even so, many parents are still confused.

A complete psychological evaluation should consist of a "battery" of tests that provide the psychologist with an accurate picture of the child's abilities. This would include an intelligence test, a test of visual-perceptual skills, a measure of academic achievement, a personality measure and a measure of adaptive behavior. Which specific tests are selected within these categories depends on the child's age, the particular questions and concerns being raised and how well the child understands spoken English.

Here are brief explanations of some commonly used tests and what they measure.

Intelligence tests. Originally, intelligence tests were used only to measure a child's academic potential. Later on, the tests were used to place children into various categories: borderline, average, mentally retarded, etc. Today, intelligence tests are often used as a measure of acquired skills (the things we have learned) and how a child adapts to new situations and solves problems.

It is important to understand that intelligence tests such as the WISC-R are made up of several sub-tests which, when taken together, result in what we know as an IQ. Therefore, when looking at your child's test scores, it is important that parents clearly understand how the score was reached; thus, the various sub-test scores should be explained to you in detail. An illustration will help to explain:

John is 12 years old and was retained in the third grade. He is currently in the fourth grade and is doing poorly. Both the school and his parents wanted information that would allow them to better understand John's problem so that he could be provided with an educational program suited to his needs. Among other tests, he was given a test of academic achievement (the WRAT-R) and an intelligence test (the WISC-R) on which he received the following scores:

WRAT-R

	standard score	percentile	grade
Reading	79	08	3B
Spelling	80	09	3B
Arithmetic	81	10	3E

WISC-R

VERBAL TESTS (scaled scores)		PERFORMANCE TESTS (scaled scores)	
Information	02	Picture Completion	07
Similarities	07	Picture Arrangement	06
Arithmetic	07	Block Design	02
Vocabulary	06	Object Assembly	04
Comprehension	09	Coding	04
(Digit Span)	(08)	(Mazes)	(04)

	IQ
Verbal Score	77
Performance Score	65
Full Scale Score	69

The scores from the **WRAT-R** are fairly straightforward. The letters "B" and "E" stand for "beginning" and "end" so that 3B means "beginning third grade." The percentile compares John's standard score with the general population. In most instances an average standard score is 100 while an average percentile is 50. The WRAT-R Reading sub-test involves only the ability to correctly read words from a list, not the ability to understand what one has read. The Math sub-test involves solving arithmetic problems ranging from very basic to advanced. On the Spelling sub-test the child is required to spell words read to him from a standard list. Most people might be inclined to look at the grade score since it is the easiest to understand. The standard score, however, is usually considered a more accurate measure of the child's academic achievement.

Now let's examine the other test. The **WISC-R** is divided into two parts— **Verbal and Performance**—each with several sub-tests (see chart). The WISC-R measures how a child does on all of these sub-tests; often there is a "range" of scores. The IQ score is based on a summary of all the sub-tests. There are no standard scores on the WISC-R but instead, "scaled" scores (10 is about average) which allow the psychologist to compare one sub-test with another. This shows us that John's Information is low (02) while his Comprehension is relatively high (09). The Information sub-test requires that the child answer questions in subjects such as geography, science and social studies—things we usually learn in school—while the Comprehension sub-test includes common sense questions that involve an understanding of behavior in social situations. In general, the **verbal tests** require oral answers to a series of questions while the **performance tests** have the child physically do something—assemble puzzles or arrange colored blocks into patterns.

We can see that John seems to have an easier time answering questions verbally than doing something physically. There are also three IQ scores reflecting verbal, nonverbal and overall abilities. What is most important is that this intelligence test involves many skills, not just one, and that while John is weak in some areas, he is relatively strong in others. Scores derived from an intelligence test can be misleading and must be examined cautiously.

What is clear from this example is that John requires a special education program specifically geared to his needs. More testing will be needed to find out how the teacher can best educate John so that he can learn and develop as best as possible. We will explore these and other tests in greater detail in future issues.